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STAT HIGH K.G.B. OFFICER IS SAID TO DEFECT

Sources in Capital Say Soviet
Agent Had Key Information

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 25 — A high-ranking officer of the K.G.B. fled the Soviet Union last year and may be the most valuable defector from the Soviet bloc to the United States in recent years, Congressional sources said today.

The defector is providing information that "is much more important" than any provided by Vitaly S. Yurchenko, the turnabout Soviet defector who returned to Moscow last year, one Congressional source said.

Another described the defector as a senior Soviet officer of the K.G.B., the Soviet intelligence and security agency, who escaped by helicopter last spring from East Germany. According to that source, the officer was questioned at an American military base in West Germany before traveling to the United States, where he has assumed a new identity.

STAT The C.I.A. would not confirm the reported defection. "We don't comment on defections," said Kathy Pherson, an agency spokesman.

Two of the Congressional sources said the Central Intelligence Agency had gone to great lengths to keep information about the new defector from being disclosed, largely because publicity might have upset the summit meeting in November between President Reagan and Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader. "The summit was a concern," one source said.

'Better Than Yurchenko'

"He is better than Yurchenko," one of the sources said of the new defector. "I don't know his rank, but he was a high guy at the K.G.B." Although it is unclear what responsibilities the defector had in the Soviet Union, the source said the United States might now learn valuable information about the K.G.B.'s organization and management.

Details of the defection were disclosed in the issue of the magazine U.S. News & World Report that goes on sale next week.

Double-Agent Role Is Seen

American law-enforcement officials have said that Mr. Yurchenko provided tips that could lead to numerous arrests of Soviet spies working in the United States. Ronald W. Pelton, a former employee of the National Security Agency who was reportedly identified by Mr. Yurchenko, is awaiting trial on espionage charges in Maryland.

But there have also been accusations that Mr. Yurchenko was a double agent sent to the United States to disrupt in-

telligence agencies here. In November he fled from his American handlers at a Washington restaurant and, after a news conference at which he accused the C.I.A. of kidnapping him, he went home. The American intelligence agency has denied that Mr. Yurchenko was held against his will.

Officials on Capitol Hill have noted that much of the information from Mr. Yurchenko may have been of limited value. For instance, they said that Mr. Pelton had apparently ended his espionage activities long before his arrest.

A Congressional source who has been skeptical of the value of Mr. Yurchenko said today that the newly disclosed Soviet official appeared to be a legitimate defector who had "technical" knowledge and had traveled frequently to Soviet bloc countries. The source would not elaborate on the defector's responsibilities in the K.G.B.

Another source said it was possible that the Soviet official was a double agent. "Who knows?" the source said. "I'm so suspicious of some of these things. I always question how good the information is."

Knowledge of Spying Doubted

After the debriefing in Western Europe, the official was brought to the United States, where his existence was kept a closely guarded secret by the C.I.A., which had been stung by publicity over Mr. Yurchenko's return to the Soviet Union, according to sources familiar with the matter.

One such source said the Soviet official apparently did not have the sort of information about intelligence matters

that would lead to arrests of Soviet spies working in the United States. "My guess is that he knows less in terms of knowing whose doing what over here," that source said. "I think he'll be more helpful in terms of helping us understand the K.G.B.'s procedures and structure."

Who the New One Might Be

Following Mr. Yurchenko's departure from the United States, Senator Patrick J. Leahy, the Vermont Democrat who is vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, called for an investigation of the handling of Mr. Yurchenko and another defector whose identity had not been previously revealed.

That other defector is apparently the Soviet official whose existence was disclosed today.

The whereabouts of the defector in the United States could not be ascertained. "He is in a place where his identity can be changed and a new life can be begun," said a source close to the situation.

Another such source said it was unclear why the defector's existence had been disclosed to reporters. But that source suggested that intelligence officials may have disclosed the information to blunt a reported proposal to shift responsibility for defectors from the Central Intelligence Agency to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Such a proposal followed Mr. Yurchenko's departure from the United States.

"Obviously this is good news for C.I.A.," one source said. "You can see why they'd want it out now."